Geertson remembered as farmer who did things his own way

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

RIDGEVIEW, Ore. — Phillip Walter Geertson, an Oregon and Idaho farmer who died Nov. 24, will be remembered by many as a campaigner against the use of genetically engineered alfalfa.

His family members and others who knew him, however, say they will remember him for much more than that.

Geertson was 75 when he passed away from cancer in a Portland, Ore., hospital.

Don Tolmie, production manager of Treasure Valley Seed Co. in Homedale, Idaho, said Geertson was well known for doing things his way, even if it went against the norm.

"Phil was a different cat; he was pretty unique," Tolmie said. "He had the Phil way of doing things that was not always the commonly accepted way of doing things."

Geertson farmed on both sides of the Idaho-Oregon border.

He is widely known as the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit along with the Center for Food Safety against genetically engineered alfalfa that resulted in the U.S. Supreme Court's first ruling, in 2010, on genetically modified crops.

Geertson claimed the use of genetically engineered alfalfa resulted in cross-pollination with his conventional alfalfa and resulted in export losses.

That 7-1 Supreme Court decision overturned a lower court ruling that placed a nationwide ban on the planting of alfalfa genetically modified to resist glyphosate, a weed killer marketed by Monsanto Co. as Roundup.

Both sides claimed victory in that ruling because the planting of genetically engineered alfalfa was still effectively banned because the U.S. Department of Agriculture was required as a result of lower court rulings to conduct an environmental impact study before deregulating it.

Geertson was involved in several similar lawsuits and never received a dime from them, said his nephew, Pat Geertson. He continued to speak to other farmers around the world about the GMO issue the rest of his life.

"He didn't understand what the need for it was and he feared the contamination would exclude a lot of hay exports from this country," said his daughter, JoAnn Behrends.

Phillip Geertson specialized in growing alfalfa seed and varieties he developed were sold around the nation.

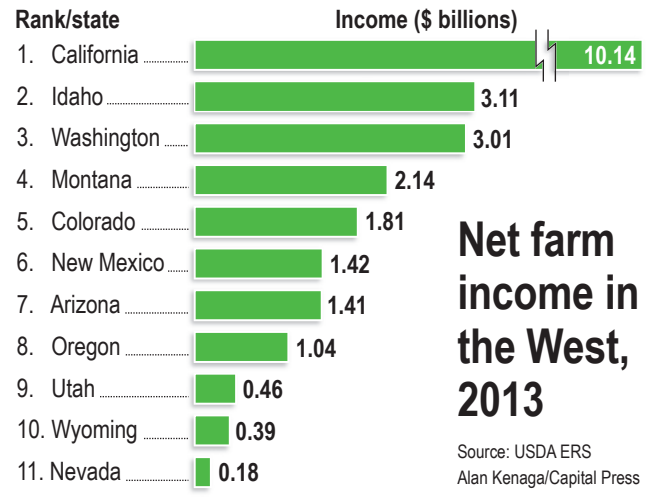
He also raised sugar beets, wheat, hybrid field corn and native plant seed and was growing blueberries in Sherwood, Ore., shortly before his death.

Pat Geertson said his uncle was instrumental in the leafcutter bee industry in the 1970s because he built and patented machines that drilled bee boards.

"He did a lot of things," Pat Geertson said. "He was always building things and coming up with different ideas all the time."

Behrends said her family wants Phillip Geertson to be remembered as someone who always did things the way he thought they should be done, even if it didn't always line up with conventional wisdom.

"He wouldn't just take what the big companies gave him for price; he would find ways to market it himself if he had to," she said. "We always said there was the right way and wrong way and then there was the Phil way."



Idaho ranked No. 2 in West in net farm income in 2013

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

The strength of Idaho's livestock sector lifted the state to a No. 2 ranking in total net farm income among the 11 Western states in 2013.

Idaho outpaced No. 3 Washington despite trailing that state by $1.6 billion in total farm cash receipts in 2013 and was unchallenged when it came to agricultural production on a per capita basis.

California easily ranked No. 1 in cash receipts at $47 billion and net income at $10.14 billion in 2013.

The rankings were compiled by University of Idaho agricultural economist Ben Eborn and are based on U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service data that recently became available for 2013.

Idaho farmers and ranchers brought in a total of $3.11 billion in net farm income in 2013 while Washington producers earned $3.01 billion.

During that year, Idaho agriculture recorded $8.4 billion in total farm gate receipts while Washington's farming sector had $10 billion.

"We're growing some crops and livestock commodities that have higher margins than what they are growing in Washington," said UI ag economist Garth Taylor.

The big difference between the two states was a stellar performance by Idaho's livestock sector, which accounted for well over half of the state's total farm receipts, he said. Crops accounted for the vast majority of Washington's farm receipts.

Milk and beef are Idaho's top two farm commodities in terms of total cash receipts, and both had high prices in 2013, Taylor said.

"Those are the hot commodities in the U.S. right now and we are expressing our comparative advantage in those commodities," he said.

Idaho will retain its No. 2 ranking for net farm income in 2014 because beef and milk prices remained at record or near-record prices this year, Eborn said.

"Both milk and cattle prices are sky high (this year)," he said. "In 2014, Idaho will be even further ahead because it was such an amazing year for livestock."

Study finds more wireworm trapping needed

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

ABERDEEN, Idaho — New research data suggests it may not always be enough for growers to set traps just a few weeks before planting to monitor fields for wireworms.

University of Idaho research entomologist Arash Rashed said his program has advised growers to bury handfuls of wet grain in fields, covering them with dark plastic to heat soil and spur germination, to attract wireworms for field sampling three weeks before planting.

However, in a study he conducted last season, some wireworms remained deep in the soil, well below trap depths, as late as June until feeding conditions became favorable.

"I think (growers) should start monitoring as soon as possible and continue monitoring so even if it's too late for one season, you can use that data for next season and know if your field has it you need to treat your seed before you plant next season," Rashed said.

For his research — funded by a USDA-REACCH program grant and Idaho's wheat and barley commissions — Rashed set traps in 10 commercial wheat fields throughout the state, and is continuing to monitor five of those fields with traps at different depths throughout the winter. For the second season of the study, he plans to approach growers with wireworm problems at cereal schools to significantly increase the number of fields involved in the study, monitoring traps monthly at 6 inches, a foot and 2 feet.

"Our hope is to get a timing on their movements — when do they start going down deep and when do they start to come up and become damaging?" Rashed said.

Photos courtesy of Arash Rashed

A wireworm is exposed. Research by University of Idaho aims to better understand the movements of wireworms and the types of soils they prefer.

Wireworms cause damage to an Idaho spring wheat field. Research by University of Idaho aims to better understand the movements of wireworms and the types of soils they prefer.

UI barley research agronomist Chris Rogers will analyze soil samples from heavily infested fields in the second year of the study, looking at factors such as organic matter, acidity, soil density, texture and moisture.

"We'll be looking at the chemical and physical components of the soil and how those factors will influence the wireworm populations and using those to potentially identify locations that may have a higher susceptibility to wireworm infestations," Rogers said.

On Eastern Idaho's dryland farms, Rashed said high wireworm populations correlated with areas with greater rainfall. Based on ambient air temperatures, he believes they also prefer warmer soils. He plans to measure soil temperatures with sensors in the upcoming season.

Rashed explained wireworms can survive in the soil for several years and are the infant stage of click beetles. They cause patches of damage within fields when they feed, stunting growth and killing seedlings, and are widespread throughout the Northwest.

Hans Hayden, a dryland farmer in Arbon Valley, Idaho, said effective chemical treatments for wireworms have been removed from the market, and the neonicotinoid seed treatments that are still available merely make them sick and delay feeding.

Hayden can detect the presence of wireworms by the emergence of Russian thistles in gaps vacated by dead spring wheat seedlings. His winter wheat tends to be advanced enough to better withstand wireworm attacks.

Hayden assumes every field is infested and always applies a seed treatment. He supports any research to provide more information about when treatments are necessary and potentially help him save on chemicals.

"I've seen them hammer fields really bad," Hayden said, adding they seem to be more destructive along ridge lines.

Washington implementing animal traceability rules

Industry welcomes state's improved computerized system

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Livestock and dairy industry representatives say several new state rule changes will help them deal with an animal disease outbreak.

The Washington State Department of Agriculture director Bud Hover recently approved several rules that will be incorporated into the state's new animal disease traceability system. It is slated to begin operation in 2015.

The new rules will:

• Establish a 23-cent per-head fee on cattle sold or slaughtered in Washington or transported out of state. The fee will fund the operation and maintenance of two computer systems used to collect information needed to quickly trace animal movements.

• Eliminate a livestock inspection exemption for private sales of unbranded, female, dairy breed cattle involving 15 head or less. Also, a buyer not moving cattle out of state must have a certificate of permit at the time of inspection.

• Require veterinarians to report cases of porcine epidemic diarrhea virus and valley fever to WSDA monthly.

• Require raw milk dairies that introduce new animals into their herds to test for bovine tuberculosis for 60 days, an increase from 30 days.

Most of the rules become effective Jan. 30. The animal disease traceability system begins July 1. The dairy exemption will be eliminated by 2016.

"The way we currently do things when we're trying to track animal movement is paper — a lot of looking through boxes and under people's desk for files, said Hector Castro, communications director for WSDA. "It's very manual, labor-intensive and can take a long time."

The database will allow the state veterinarian to quickly trace the origin of livestock in the event of an animal disease outbreak and limit exposure, said Jack Field, executive vice president of the Washington Cattlemen's Association.

"This is a very positive step forward, this is an industry-led effort," he said. "This is going to be a very welcome system for producers of all sizes through all segments of the industry."

The dairy industry is working to set up an electronic reporting system before the exemption is eliminated. It would be easier and faster than having a brand inspector come out, said Dan Wood, director of government relations for the Washington State Dairy Federation. Removal of the exemption will coincide with the introduction of the new system, Castro said.

"Most of the dairy producers already have the data in their computers," Wood said. "It makes sense to us that they be able to transfer that electronically rather than paying for time, mileage and a higher fee for someone to come out and see with their own eyes what's already in the database."

Ninety percent of producers indicated they would use an electronic system, Wood said.

The state continues to develop the electronic systems required to implement the new traceability program, Castro said.

Backers say factory will buy $26 million from farm sector

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

GREENLEAF, Idaho — The head of a proposed value-added ethanol facility just east of Greenleaf says the plant would make $26 million worth of purchases from Idaho's farm sector annually.

Sot Chimonas, chief operating officer of Demeter Bio-resources, told the Capital Press that food processing would be the main focus of the facility.

A group of local citizens trying to stop the facility is concerned about the impacts of the proposed ethanol part of the project.

A public hearing on Demeter's application for a conditional use permit to build the ethanol portion of the facility has been delayed until Jan. 15.

Chimonas said he wishes local residents would think more about the food processing side of the facility and what the project could do for farmers and the local economy.

He said the proposed ethanol facility is about one-tenth the size of a traditional Midwest ethanol plant.

"It's really not an ethanol facility; it's a food-processing facility that makes food ingredients," he said. "Unfortunately, the word 'ethanol' is what they are stuck on and that's what they are commenting on."

Chimonas said the facility would use barley and a hybrid tuber called a SunSpud to produce healthy food ingredients. Starch would be separated to produce ethanol and the facility would also produce organic fertilizer.

Chimonas said this is the first of several such projects Demeter plans to build in Idaho and Montana. The idea is to build the plants close to the source of agricultural production, he said.

Local farmer Stan Siewert, who has grown Sun Spuds and barley for Demeter since 2012, submitted written testimony in favor of the project.

Siewert, who helped manage or start 25 ethanol plants, said many of them rejuvenated small Midwestern towns.

"It is my hope that a new added-value facility can provide local farmers new crops to grow and Canyon County with local jobs and additional tax base," he stated.

But some other farmers, who testified in opposition to the facility, have concerns about the plant's possible impact and they question how viable SunSpuds would be in this valley, which produces a lot of high-value crops like seed, onions and hops.

Wilder farmer Ray Gross said he has a lot of unanswered questions about SunSpuds and how they will fit in here.

"What does it do to the ground as far as volunteers? Is it a host for certain diseases we don't like to have around here?" he said.

Like Gross, Dave Dixon, who farms 2.5 miles from the proposed facility, said he's not dead-set against the idea; he just wants more information and it has to make good agronomic sense for farmers.

His main concern is that the facility would end up using commodities shipped in from other areas.

"I am absolutely against shipping all the (feedstocks) in from different areas and leaving (us) with only the environmental impact and not putting any money into the area," he said.

Chimonas said the company could have done a better job of reaching out to local farmers.

"We realize that we probably should have done a little more PR with the farm community," he said. "Eventually we will and I think the farm community should welcome it."